

# Interferon $\gamma$ -independent effects of interleukin 12 administered during acute or established infection due to *Leishmania major*

(cell-mediated immunity/interleukin 4/leishmaniasis/cytokines)

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**ABSTRACT** Interleukin 12 (IL-12) is a powerful stimulus for the growth of activated T and natural killer cells, their generation of interferon  $\gamma$  (IFN- $\gamma$ ), and the differentiation of T helper type 1 (T<sub>H1</sub>) effector cells from naive precursors *in vitro*. These activities are consistent with the capacity of exogenous IL-12 to heal otherwise susceptible BALB/c mice infected with the intramacrophage parasite *Leishmania major*. Using this characterized model of CD4 cell subset differentiation, we examined the immunologic effects of IL-12 administered either at the time of infection, when naive T cells are primed, or after 14 days of infection, by which time CD4<sup>+</sup> subset differentiation has occurred. Given with the inoculation of parasites, IL-12 induced IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 and markedly suppressed IL-4. Effects on IL-10 and IL-4 were comparable in mice with homozygous disruption of the IFN- $\gamma$  gene (IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$ ), and suppression of IL-4 was unchanged by administration of neutralizing anti-IL-10 antibody. Induction of IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 mRNA by IL-12 also occurred in infected SCID mice. Given after day 14 of infection, however, IL-12 not only induced IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 but also induced IL-4 in normal and IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  mice. These data demonstrate direct effects of IL-12 independent of IFN- $\gamma$ , IL-10, and IL-4 and demonstrate that the ineffectiveness of IL-12 administered following infection with *L. major* correlates with resistance of differentiated T<sub>H2</sub> cells to the IL-4-suppressing activity of IL-12.

Experimental infection of mice with *Leishmania major* is a well-characterized model for the differentiation of CD4<sup>+</sup> effector cell populations *in vivo* (1, 2). Inbred strains capable of controlling infection develop *Leishmania*-specific T helper type 1 (T<sub>H1</sub>) cells that provide macrophage-activating cytokines required for restricting the spread of the intracellular amastigotes. Interferon  $\gamma$  (IFN- $\gamma$ ) is particularly important among these T<sub>H1</sub>-derived cytokines; animals deficient in IFN- $\gamma$  are unable to restrict growth of the parasite and develop progressive infection (3). Genetically susceptible mice, such as BALB/c, develop ineffective T<sub>H2</sub> responses to *L. major* and likewise fail to control infection (2). The presence of the counter-regulatory cytokines interleukin 4 (IL-4) and IL-10 presumably accounts for the failure of exogenously provided IFN- $\gamma$  to overcome genetically programmed T<sub>H2</sub> cell development or favorably influence the course of disease (4).

IL-12 is a heterodimeric cytokine produced by macrophages and B-cell lines that has been implicated in T<sub>H1</sub> cell development *in vitro* (5, 6). IL-12 is a growth factor and a potent stimulus for IFN- $\gamma$  production from activated T lymphocytes and natural killer (NK) cells (7, 8). In contrast to IFN- $\gamma$ , IL-12 given at the time of inoculation of *L. major* was

successful in protecting BALB/c mice from progressive disease (9, 10). Exogenous IL-12 bypasses the capacity of the promastigotes to evade IL-12 induction during the establishment of natural infection (11). When given later in infection, however, IL-12 was unable to reverse the course of infection in BALB/c mice (10), suggesting some differential effect of this cytokine when given during priming or fully developed immune responses. We have used the murine model of *L. major* infection to demonstrate the marked capacity of IL-12 to suppress IL-4 when given at the time of inoculation of organisms and the loss of this capacity when IL-12 is given 2 weeks after the establishment of the immune response. Further, these responses were independent of the induction of IFN- $\gamma$ , as demonstrated for mice with disruption of the IFN- $\gamma$  gene.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Animals and Parasites.** Mice with targeted homozygous disruption of the IFN- $\gamma$  gene (IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$ ) were developed and screened as described (12), backcrossed seven generations onto the C57BL/6 and BALB/c backgrounds, and maintained along with heterozygous littermates (IFN- $\gamma^{+/0}$ ) in the University of California, San Francisco, Transgenic Facility. BALB/c, C57BL/6, and C.B-17/*scid* (SCID, severe combined immunodeficiency) mice were purchased from The Jackson Laboratory. Groups of four to six mice were infected in the hind footpads with 10<sup>6</sup> stationary-phase promastigotes of *L. major* (strain WHOM/IR-173) as described (2). Designated groups of mice received the following special reagents: recombinant murine IL-12, prepared as described (13), intraperitoneally as 1  $\mu$ g in 0.1 ml of phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) with 1% syngeneic mouse serum for four consecutive days starting either at the same time or 14 days following inoculation of the parasites; 1 mg of anti-IL-4 monoclonal antibody (mAb) 11B11 intraperitoneally at the time of infection, to induce a healer phenotype (4); 2 mg of neutralizing anti-IL-10 mAb JES5-2A5 (rat IgG1; ref. 14) intraperitoneally at the time of inoculation of the parasites; 1 mg of anti-CD4 mAb GK1.5 for two consecutive days prior to harvest of lymph node tissues; or 1 mg of neutralizing anti-IFN- $\gamma$  mAb XMG1.2 at the time of inoculation of the organisms. An additional group of uninfected mice received 800  $\mu$ g of goat anti-mouse IgD mAb (kindly provided by F. Finkelman, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, MD) intravenously as described (13).

**Collection of Lymph Node Tissues.** At designated times after infection, mice were killed and the popliteal lymph nodes were collected. Mice treated with anti-IgD had spleens col-

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Abbreviations: IFN- $\gamma$ , interferon- $\gamma$ ; IL, interleukin; HPRT, hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase; NK, natural killer; mAb, monoclonal antibody.

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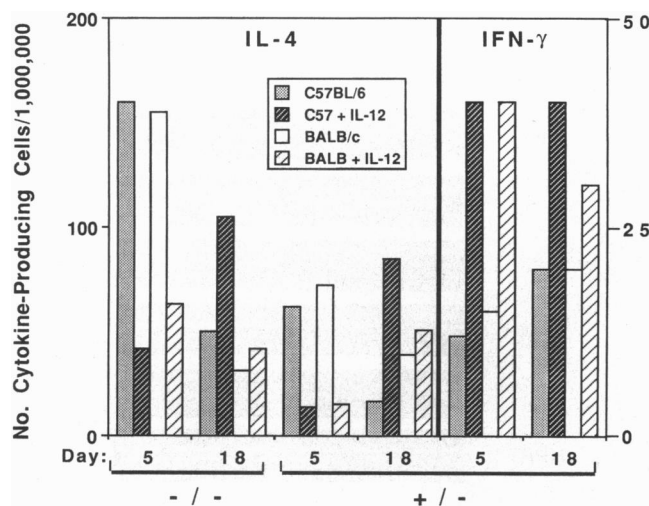


Fig. 2. ELISPOT assays for IL-4 and IFN- $\gamma$  production after infection with *L. major*. Isolated popliteal lymph node cells were collected from infected IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  (-/-) or IFN- $\gamma^{+/0}$  (+/-) BALB/c or C57BL/6 mice on day 5 or 18 after infection. Designated mice were treated with IL-12 (+ IL-12) for 4 days before tissues were harvested. Cells were incubated in wells coated with antibodies to IL-4 or IFN- $\gamma$  and, after 24 hr, were washed away to allow colorimetric detection of the captured cytokine as counted by inverted microscopy. Variation was <10% between duplicate samples. Data represent one of three comparable experiments.

**Effect of IL-12 During the Acute Response to Anti-IgD.** Anti-IgD is an acute and powerful inducing agent for a number of cytokines, particularly IL-4 (13). Mice with disruption of the IFN- $\gamma$  gene were given anti-IgD intravenously and treated with either IL-12 (0.5  $\mu$ g) or saline control daily for 5 days. Transcripts for IL-4 were significantly suppressed (over 6-fold;  $P < 0.05$ ), and ELISPOT spot-positive cells were reduced (5-fold;  $P < 0.05$ ) and transcripts for IL-10 were enhanced (2.5-fold;  $P < 0.05$ ) by treatment with IL-12 (data not shown), consistent with the effects of IL-12 during acute *L. major* infection. Serum collected from similarly treated IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  animals on day 8 revealed suppression of total IgE levels from  $43 \pm 14$   $\mu$ g/ml in anti-IgD-treated mice to  $12 \pm 4$   $\mu$ g/ml in mice receiving IL-12 plus anti-IgD.

**Effect of IL-12 on a Developed Immune Response to *L. major*.** By 14 days after inoculation of the organisms, immunologic interventions have lost their capacity to ameliorate the course of disease in susceptible BALB/c mice (17),

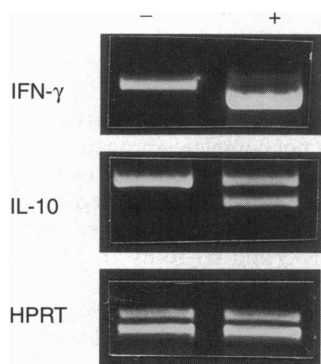


Fig. 3. IL-12 induces IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 mRNA in infected SCID mice. Groups of five SCID mice were inoculated with *L. major* and either left untreated (-) or treated with 1  $\mu$ g of IL-12 daily for four consecutive days (+). On the fifth day, popliteal lymph nodes were collected, and the mRNA was analyzed for IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 transcripts by competitive reverse transcription-PCR as detailed in the legend to Fig. 1.

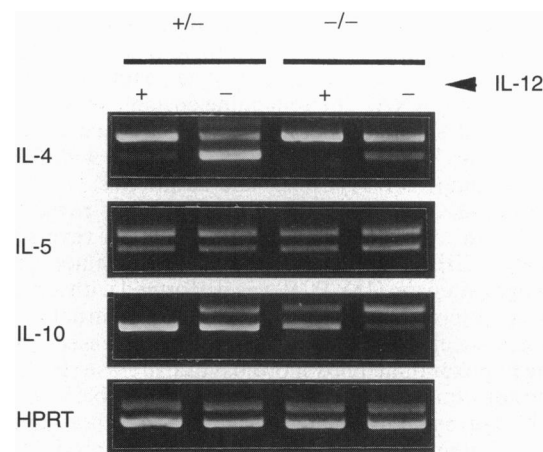


Fig. 4. Cytokine mRNA expression in mice treated with anti-IL-10 after infection with *L. major*. Groups of four BALB/c mice with heterozygous (+/-) or homozygous (-/-) disruption of the IFN- $\gamma$  gene were infected with *L. major* and treated with (+) or without (-) IL-12 for 4 days. All mice received 2 mg of neutralizing anti-IL-10 mAb at the time of infection. On the fifth day, popliteal lymph node mRNA was collected and analyzed for the designated cytokine transcripts by competitive reverse transcription-PCR.

suggesting that effector lymphocytes may be less responsive than naive precursor cells. To assess this more carefully, BALB/c mice were inoculated with *L. major* and, after 14 days, treated for 4 days with either IL-12 or saline control and killed the following day to characterize the effects of IL-12 on the immune response. Although the capacity of IL-12 to induce IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 was comparable to that in mice examined during the acute response, the capacity of IL-12 to abrogate IL-4 production was no longer present (Fig. 5). As assessed by both transcript analysis and ELISPOT assays (Fig. 2), IL-12 consistently enhanced IL-4 production when given during this later period; slight but consistent increases in IL-5 and IL-13 mRNA were also apparent. Comparable results were obtained in C57BL/6 and BALB/c IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  mice, suggesting no role for IFN- $\gamma$  in these effects. Treatment of mice with depleting anti-CD4 antibody prior to harvesting of tissues resulted in attenuation, but not complete abroga-

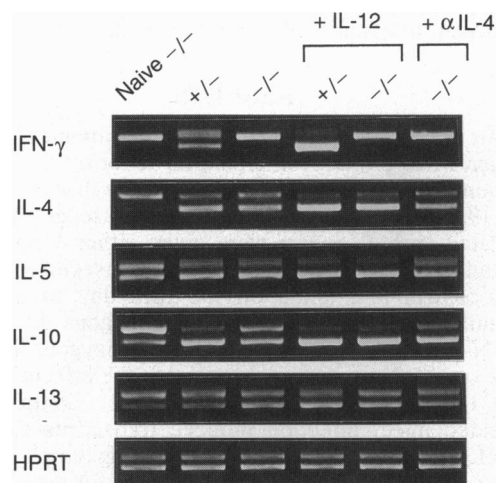


Fig. 5. Cytokine mRNA expression 18 days after infection with *L. major*. Groups of mice designated as in the legend to Fig. 1 were infected with *L. major* with or without treatment with anti-IL-4 (+  $\alpha$ IL-4), but treatment with four daily doses of IL-12 (+ IL-12) was not begun until 14 days after infection. Popliteal lymph node cells were collected 1 day after the last IL-12 dose and mRNA was prepared and analyzed as detailed in the legend to Fig. 1. Results represent one of three comparable experiments.

tion, of the enhancing effects of IL-12 on IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 transcripts, although the reduction was qualitatively more marked than at the earlier time point (data not shown).

## DISCUSSION

We have used experimental infection with *L. major*, a well-characterized system for analyzing CD4<sup>+</sup> effector cell differentiation, to examine the effects of exogenous IL-12 on the immune response. As shown by both mRNA- and protein-based assays, IL-12 powerfully curtailed IL-4 generation when administered at the time of inoculation of the parasites but had little effect when administered 2 weeks after established infection, despite the observation that IL-4 production is comparable at these times (11). In contrast, enhanced IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 production occurred under both conditions. Further, as assessed in mice with homozygous disruption of the IFN- $\gamma$  gene, the effects of IL-12 on IL-4 and IL-10 generation were independent of the production of IFN- $\gamma$ . Similarly IFN- $\gamma$ -independent effects on cytokine transcripts and production were observed with anti-IgD, an independent acute stimulus for IL-4 and IL-10 production. These data demonstrate substantial differences in the effects of IL-12 when administered during priming or during established responses that presumably underlie the reported therapeutic efficacy of IL-12 in experimental leishmaniasis (9, 10).

Prior studies examining the efficacy of IL-12 given for the first 5–7 days of infection in protecting BALB/c mice from *L. major* demonstrated suppression of IL-4 and enhancement of IFN- $\gamma$  production by CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells isolated 4–5 weeks following inoculation of the organisms (9, 10). As demonstrated here, these cytokine patterns are established by the time of completion of treatment with IL-12 and include enhanced IL-10 mRNA as well. These effects of IL-12 were not seen with other interventions that enable BALB/c mice to cure this infection, such as anti-IL-4 treatment, and were independent of IFN- $\gamma$ , as demonstrated with IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  mice. Although our prior studies demonstrated that CD4<sup>+</sup> T cells from IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  mice on the C57BL/6 background default to the T<sub>H2</sub> phenotype following infection with *L. major* (3), the data here demonstrate the capacity of IL-12 to overcome this default pathway when administered early in both the C57BL/6 and BALB/c strains. The inefficacy of exogenous IFN- $\gamma$  (4) and the potency of anti-IL-4 (4), in contrast to anti-IL-10 (17), in protecting infected BALB/c mice from *L. major* strongly suggest that the major pathway underlying the ability of exogenous IL-12 to protect BALB/c mice is the marked suppression of IL-4. The inability of anti-IL-10 to affect the suppression of IL-4 was consistent with a direct effect of IL-12 on T cells, as suggested by *in vitro* studies (5). Further, the induction of IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 mRNA in infected SCID mice was consistent with a direct IL-4-independent effect of IL-12 on NK cells.

As previously noted (13), the use of infectious agents to investigate the immune response to IL-12 may confuse the direct effects of IL-12 with more indirect effects caused by differences in parasite survival and dissemination. As demonstrated here, however, these effects on IL-4 and IL-10 generation were also seen when IL-12 was administered at the time of intravenous inoculation of goat anti-mouse IgD, a powerful inducer of cytokine production *in vivo*. Although these data corroborate previous findings in normal mice (13), the use of IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  mice established that these effects were independent of the stimulation of endogenous IFN- $\gamma$  production, in agreement with prior conclusions in different systems using coadministration of anti-IFN- $\gamma$  antibody (13, 18). The results with anti-IgD are consistent with our findings in acute *L. major* infection and independently confirm the direct effects of IL-12 on IL-4 and IL-10 generation during acute immunologic responses.

Prior studies demonstrated the loss of efficacy of exogenous IL-12 when treatment was begun 1 week following inoculation of *L. major* (10). CD4<sup>+</sup> effector cell differentiation becomes established during this period, consistent with the inability of a number of interventions—including anti-CD4 antibody, anti-IL-4, and sublethal irradiation—to affect established effector cells. The data here suggest similar, although differential, effects of IL-12 on established immune responses, as previously noted in experiments on intestinal nematode infection (19). Most importantly, although IFN- $\gamma$  and IL-10 production continued to be stimulated, IL-4 (and, to a lesser extent, IL-5) production was enhanced following administration of IL-12, and these effects were comparable in IFN- $\gamma^{+/0}$  and IFN- $\gamma^{0/0}$  mice. The mechanisms by which the regulation of IL-4 changes during the differentiation of effector T cells remain unclear. Recent data on *in vitro* systems have demonstrated differential effects of IL-12 on murine T<sub>H1</sub> and T<sub>H2</sub> cells, including the failure of IL-12 to serve as a costimulatory signal or upregulate the IL-2 receptor  $\alpha$  chain on T<sub>H2</sub> cells in contrast to T<sub>H1</sub> cells (20–22). The recent cloning of at least one component of the IL-12 receptor (23) should permit a more direct study of the differential expression of IL-12 receptors by naive, T<sub>H0</sub>, T<sub>H1</sub>, and T<sub>H2</sub> cells. The data presented here extend prior findings to *in vivo* CD4<sup>+</sup> effector cell differentiation.

Although these data are consistent with the timing requirements for IL-12 in the successful treatment of murine leishmaniasis and of murine models of melanoma metastasis (24), caution may be required before extending these findings to human studies. Thus patients with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection have had restoration of cytotoxic activity and HIV-specific cell-mediated immune responses by IL-12 treatment of peripheral blood mononuclear cells *in vitro* (25, 26), and human T<sub>H2</sub> clones have been induced to produce IFN- $\gamma$  by incubation with IL-12 *in vitro* (27). The distribution of IL-12 receptors on T and NK cells (28) suggests that these cells are the targets affected by exogenous IL-12 administered therapeutically in *L. major* infection. Our data on SCID mice suggest that NK cells, although known to produce IFN- $\gamma$  in response to IL-12 (29, 30), may also transcribe IL-10 mRNA, a finding confirmed in isolated spleen and bone marrow NK cell preparations (S. Z. and R. M. L., unpublished observations). Whether IL-12 directly affects T<sub>H1</sub> development from precursor cells by suppressing autocrine IL-4 produced during priming, as suggested by *in vitro* studies (5), or suppresses IL-4 production from the CD4<sup>+</sup>, NK1.1<sup>+</sup> population of cells identified as the major source of the initial IL-4 generated in response to anti-CD3 *in vivo* (31) is an important question that will require further investigation. Either mechanism might explain the powerful effect of IL-12 administered as an adjuvant to promote immune responses of the T<sub>H1</sub> phenotype upon secondary challenge (32).

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